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Provincial Table on
Information Management
(PTIM)

The Promise Of Information Technology

How the Ministry for Children and Families and its Service Partners Can Use Information Technology to Work Together in the Future

Discussion Paper
May 2000

BRITISH COLUMBIA
Ministry for Children and Families

100-06340/

Message from the PTIM Co-Chairs

The world is changing fast – you've heard that somewhere before haven't you? Well, it's true.

Technology is having a profound effect – an effect that will continue to grow – both on the way people connect with each other and how they expect services to be provided, and on the way we collect and exchange information.

The Ministry for Children and Families established the Provincial Table for Consultation in 1999 to strengthen relationships between the ministry and its broad range of more than 6,000 community social service partners. The ministry established the Provincial Table on Information Management (PTIM) as an offshoot of that wider table specifically to explore the possibility of alliances between the ministry and its service partners in the area of information management.

The 16-member PTIM includes senior representatives from the ministry and from each major community partner sector, including child and family services, community living, addictions, multicultural and immigrant services, child care and the United Way.

This draft discussion paper presents what we see as a possible vision for how we can together harness the tremendous promise offered by information technology, and turn it into something that truly works for us and our clients – the children and families of BC. Technology should improve what we do, not just make it more complicated.

We want to know what you think of this vision, and of the principles, issues and pathfinder projects also outlined here. We hope that you will take the time to read this paper thoroughly, and use the questions we have provided at the end to let us know your thoughts, ideas and concerns.

Theresa Kerin
Assistant Deputy Minister
Ministry for Children and Families

Tim Beachy
Chief Executive Officer
United Community Services Co-op

PTIM Members

Ministry for Children and Families

- Janice Aull, Director, Corporate Policy Branch
- Al Boyd, Director, Information and Records Management
- Gord Butterfield, Director, Systems Services Branch
- Rob Harvey, Ministry Resource Centre
- Theresa Kerin, Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Policy Division and Chief Information Officer
- Gregory Muirhead, Director, Data Analysis Branch
- Michelle Wong, Regional Operations Division
- David Young, Director, Contract Reform

Service Partners

- Martin Addison, United Way of the Lower Mainland
- Tim Beachy, United Community Services Co-op
- Kaela Jubas, BC Association of Child Care Services
- Vera Radyo, Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC
- Dan Reist, Association of Substance Abuse Programs of BC
- Jack Styan, British Columbia Association for Community Living
- Rob Twiddy, Federation of Child and Family Services of BC
- Kevin Bergonder Community Social Services Employers' Association

Introduction

The arguments in favour of using information technology to link the government and its community social service partners are clear.

The appropriate and efficient use of information technology will enable us to:

- improve the way we manage client case files
- enhance the joint planning of services
- simplify contract management and reporting relationships
- streamline human resources and collective negotiations, and
- share our combined data and knowledge.

And that, in turn, will give us the biggest benefit of all: better service for our clients.

But what is "appropriate," especially in the kind of sensitive area that we work in, where client files must be kept confidential and agencies sometimes feel they have to strive to maintain the necessary distance and autonomy from government? And how do we ensure that what we implement is "efficient"?

We need to plan carefully and well to make sure the systems we develop and install do exactly what we want them to do, and that they work for us and our work with our clients and each other.

This Paper/Next Steps

We see this paper as a beginning in a number of ways, and we have called it a "draft" discussion paper for a reason.

This paper describes a vision for a shared network, shared data and shared systems. It also outlines the principles on which we believe we must base this vision, and presents some of the hurdles or issues that we will need to resolve before we can proceed much further.

Based on your feedback, we intend to refine this vision and then present a second, "final" discussion paper at a special Information Technology Symposium – all key stakeholders invited – tentatively scheduled to coincide with the Community Social Services Employers' Association AGM in late October 2000.

Based on the additional feedback gathered through that symposium, we will then develop a formal *Shared Strategic Information Management Plan* by November 30, 2000, and send it on to our parent body, the Provincial Table for Consultation, for final review and direction.

But we also see this paper as a beginning in another way as well.

At the moment, the vision described here applies only to the Ministry for Children and Families and its community social service partners.
We will, however, be circulating this paper to other ministries over the next few months and we anticipate that this vision – and our final *Shared Strategic Information Management Plan* – will eventually form the blueprint for similar plans across government.

Schedule

Feedback from ministry and service partners
- Due **September 15, 2000**

Final Discussion Paper
- By **September 30, 2000**

Information Technology Symposium
- On **October 20, 2000**

Shared Strategic Information Management Plan
- By **November 30, 2000**

Vision: What We Want to Create

The Ministry for Children and Families is arguably one of the most complex ministries in the BC government, providing a diverse range of programs and services through a series of working partnerships with more than 6,000 individuals and organizations.

This mixed family of service partners not only encompasses a variety of professional roles, perspectives and support bases, it also operates under a number of different accountability structures and many different pieces of legislation, as well as an array of distinct operating policies and practices.

Within this complex environment we have, on the whole, operated pretty well; we've not done badly so far in communicating, cooperating and collaborating with each other through established pathways – pathways we know well and are comfortable with right now.

So why change?

Because we believe we can do even better in the future.

The Promise of Information Technology

The Ministry for Children and Families' 1999 *Information Management Action Plan* defines information management as:

1. identifying what information we need to provide the best possible service to our clients, and
2. establishing the systems – automated or manual – we need to collect, organize, store, protect, access, disseminate, analyze and report this information efficiently.

But that doesn't come close to revealing the true promise of information technology, for government and service agencies alike, and for the clients we serve.

In the work we do with children and families, human contact will always be critical and essential. Nothing can replace or lessen the importance of one person talking to another, in person or over the phone. However, with technology (specifically the Internet and e-mail), we are coming to see the possibilities and benefits both of other forms of communication, and of other ways of transmitting information.
For example:

- a specialist who works with children who have fetal alcohol syndrome will be able to explore Fetal Alcohol Effect/Fetal Alcohol Syndrome research sites from around the world to keep up-to-date on the latest information, and then will be able to share that information with his co-workers without using either a printer or photocopier
- clients who cannot make it to a ministry office during regular office hours will be able to find out about or apply for new services by going to the ministry's website and linking to other service partner websites as needed

- the Executive Director of an agency in Prince George will be able to hold an on-line, real-time conference with her counterparts in Vancouver, Smithers and Port Alberni – without ever leaving her office
- a child protection worker will be able to find out the latest on a missing child through a link to the RCMP's missing person's database
- the ministry will be able to send out an update to all service partners on an important change to next year's contracts with one-Email only that everyone receives at the same time (cheaper and faster than fax)
- the ministry and agencies will be able to subscribe to customized information services, providing daily or weekly lists of new publications or newspaper articles on specific subject areas.

Perhaps most important of all, our clients will be able to receive more seamless and consistent services, from a variety of distinct – but linked – agencies.

We will all be able to transfer case information back and forth as necessary – with, of course, full safeguards to protect the privacy of all our clients (perhaps even better safeguards than are available now through fax or telephone), and exceptions to information sharing where necessary (personal details in the case files of women at a Transition House, for example).

For case management alone, the benefits of this are many.

For example, a client who requires a number of services will have to provide detailed background information once only – at entry to one service. We will then be able to transmit that client's files to other members of his or her service team for consultation, and know that we all are working from exactly the same information. Any modifications or additions to the file made by one member of the team will then be added electronically to the files of all members. And that's really just the beginning.

Pathfinder Projects

To illustrate what shared information management might look like in action, we have developed a number of ideas for "pathfinder" projects.

Right now, we share very little electronically. These projects will test practical ways for us to work more closely together in the future, by sharing not only systems and data, but also experience and expertise.

Several of these pathfinder projects are highlighted in boxes throughout this document – but we believe there are many more possibilities for exploration. We'd also like to hear about your ideas for new ways to use technology in our work.

For the children and families of BC, we believe that the good and well-planned use of information technology holds the key not only to a more fully integrated service where front-line ministry staff and service partners work more closely than ever before to coordinate and plan client services, but also to more efficient and cost-effective programs and services overall, which in turn will lead to a further benefit: more funds for the actual provision of services and more time to spend with clients.

Shared Network, Shared Systems, Shared Data

The promise of information technology is endless, but that is all it is – promise – until we can find a way to make it a reality. And we believe the best way to turn promise into reality is through collaboration and sharing.

We serve many of the same clients; we share similar objectives for our programs and services; we use many of the same resources and supports; we need the same fast and efficient communication; we are responsible for finding the most cost-effective ways to provide the best service possible.

On many levels, it makes sense for the ministry and its service partners to share an information management strategy. Today's economies of scale mean that it is more cost-effective to work together in one integrated system than to develop a multitude of smaller models.

In three years – by 2003 – we would like to have in place a fully integrated, client-centred, ministry/service partner information management system, where:

- we are linked together by a shared network, and
- we share all essential systems and data protected by the Privacy Charter.

Through a shared network, all ministry staff and service partners across the province will be connected electronically. That means we will have individual computer workstations that operate independently, but these workstations will also be linked – through an Extranet or private Internet – to others in the network.

To ensure security, only authorized senders and authorized receivers will be allowed access into the shared network (similar to a double registered mail system). We will also be able to restrict access in other ways. Whenever we create a new file, we will be able to determine exactly where it goes: into a personal folder (private, no access to anyone else), into a folder that is accessible only to selected others within our own branch or agency, or into a folder that is accessible to everyone within the network.

Infrastructure Assumption

This vision is based on the assumption that the ministry and its service partners will have access to:

- compatible hardware
- common, user-friendly software
- appropriate training and support
- ongoing maintenance
- systems development –The system development work that has already been done by ministries and service partners will not be duplicated but instead be used as examples to learn from in terms of planning and implementation.

Security Assumption

This vision also assumes that the shared network will be secure, and that all access to data – including client, contract and payment information – will be carefully controlled.

This shared network, in turn, will allow us to share systems – including systems for case management, contract management and human resources (see below for more on these shared systems) – that use a common language, common information standards and common data sources (which simply means our computers will be able to talk to each other, and we will be able to read files and incorporate data sent to us from other people, without having to worry about complex conversions from one system to another).

From that shared foundation, we will then be able to communicate with each other easily (more easily often than using a fax or telephone), and easily and securely exchange confidential client information and referrals. We will also be able to:

- track clients across a variety of programs and services, regardless of where or when they access the program or service
- evaluate the performance of individual programs and services at all levels: local, regional and provincial
- share best practices and enhance the knowledge base and research potential of our staff
- provide the public with up-to-date and reliable facts and figures as necessary (leading to enhanced public profile)
- better manage contracts and ensure agencies are paid accurately and on time (agencies will also be able to track their invoices as they go through the government payment system), and
- erase existing barriers of geography and size by guaranteeing all service partners and ministry staff – no matter where they are located or the size of their programs – equal, anywhere/anytime access to system services and data, 24-hours-a-day, seven days a week in all locations.

We also envision that we will be able to use this shared foundation to support:

- links to a range of other related and important stakeholders, such as doctors, teachers and the courts
- improved in-service training where training is:
  - tailored to suit the needs of each individual
  - provided as and when it is needed – as one new person is hired, for example, rather than waiting until the next organized session, and
  - distributed where it is needed across the province, rather than requiring staff to come to a major centre

- timely and accurate information for ministry cabinet submissions, contract negotiations and collective bargaining.

In addition, we anticipate that agencies will be able to use the data collected and stored by all partners to support applications for funding from other sources, such as the federal government, to deliver new or different services. They will also be able to share this data with the community.

Pathfinder Project: Community Data Website

Right now, important aggregate data about our clients and our various programs and services exists in a variety of different formats, on a variety of different, often incompatible systems – which means only a limited number of people are able to use (or even know about) this information.

A Community Data Website would bring selected, existing information from a variety of sources into one central database, and then make it available to everyone in the shared ministry/ service partner network. Agencies could use it to support grant applications, analyze trends in their community, measure their success and post their data so it becomes a shared resource.

More About Shared Systems

A shared network will allow us to share a variety of software systems and to transfer data back and forth as required. The three most important shared systems we envision right now are:

Case Management

Under a shared case management system, each client will have a unique identifier. A unique client identifier (such as the personal health number supplied by the Ministry of Health) will enable ministry staff and service partners to:

- enter basic client data once only, at intake
- share client information quickly and efficiently
- electronically refer clients from one program or service to another
- track clients as they move from one program/service or location, and
- create what are called "longitudinal" client records (records that include information from first contact, through assessment, service planning and delivery, to evaluation and file closure).

Pathfinder Project: Electronic Referrals

Client referrals today must be done manually using telephone and fax and can take a fair bit of time both to complete and have approved.

In an electronic referral process, staff would be able to fill out an on-line referral form and send it and any other related material to another part of the ministry or another service agency over the shared network. The project could look at a variety of factors, including security of information, potential savings, and effectiveness in speeding up the referral process.

In addition, the ministry and service partners will be able to use case management information to:

- evaluate results on a variety of levels: client, program/service, community, agency, and community
- identify the amount, cost and nature of the programs/services delivered to clients
- identify gaps in services, and
- support needs assessments.

Human Resources

Under a shared human resource system, the ministry and service partners will be able to exchange crucial decision-making information data with each other and with employers' associations.

This information exchange will support the negotiation of future collective and independent agreements and the implementation of current agreements, as well as human resource management within each agency.

Contract Management

Under a shared contract management system, service partners will each have one contract (continuing agreement) with government and will be able to electronically file and authorize contracts.

The BC government will pay agencies electronically and both ministry and service partners will be able to:

- maintain a registry of service providers and provide information services on accreditation and the sites or homes they manage;
- manage a centralized repository for all contracts to ensure:
- streamlined administration
- consolidation of services on component schedules
- consistent approach in definition of services and outcomes;
- track, evaluate and compare contracts across a number of budgets, activity codes and responsibility centres
- evaluate contracts and monitor contract performance
- monitor resource usage and cost
- produce consolidated, timely and accurate payments
- verify invoices against contracts;
- easily access details on payments and payment status
- automatically track key events by using integrated workflow tools; and
- support the objectives of contract reform.

Principles: Necessary to Success

We believe the vision of a shared information technology system that is appropriate and open and accessible to all partners is indeed possible to achieve. However, we also aware that certain protections must be in place both for our clients and for our continued successful working relationships.

Our vision will succeed only if all members of the sector – the ministry and the individual agencies involved in community social service delivery – commit to certain specific and fundamental principles to govern the shared development and use of information technology in the future. Specifically:

- The best interest of all clients and communities will be paramount.
- The government and social service agencies will be equal partners, and will work in collaboration.
- The government and social service agencies will recognize and respect each others' operational autonomy and accountabilities.
- Client privacy will be protected.
- All shared data will fall within the parameters of the MCF *Privacy Charter* and applicable legislation.
- Access to data (and data sharing) will be governed by formal protocol.
- Clients will "own" their own files; clients and client advocates will have the right to access information systems, to see, discuss and challenge their files subject to existing privacy and access legislation.
- All stakeholders will have access to the same technology and the same combined data, at the same reasonable cost, regardless of size or geographic location.
- Technology will be useful and user-friendly.
- Service will drive technology; technology will not drive service – technology development and funding will be guided by cost-effectiveness and flexibility, and will not be at the expense of service delivery.
- We will explore creative funding options – such as federal government sponsorship or private/public sector partnerships – for all information technology projects.
- We will actively search for ways to maximize or extend the life of our investment in information technology.

Pathfinder Project: Information and Privacy Services

This project would test the effectiveness of having the ministry's Information and Record Services Branch provide community service partners with the same services it provides to ministry offices. These services would include:

- helping service partners to process formal requests for access to information
- reviewing privacy complaints
- responding to reviews or investigations conducted by the Information and Privacy Commissioner, and
- providing advice on such topics as:
- general responsibilities under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act

    - ownership of records
    - collection, use and disclosure of records
    - clients' rights to access or correct records containing personal information, and
    - third-party requests for access to records containing personal information.

These services could be provided through an FOI Helpdesk.

Issues to be Resolved

For a shared information management system to succeed, we will need to resolve a number of difficult and challenging issues – ranging from making sure everyone is ready for the change, to resolving the existing lack of trust between the government and service partners, to determining who will pay for and own the system.

Readiness

Moving to a shared information management system is a major step that will require an equally major leap of faith by people who may not yet be convinced of the benefits of information technology, either for themselves or for their clients.

We will need to create an atmosphere where all members of the ministry/service partner family both understand and appreciate the value of using information technology in their work, and become actively involved in exploring possibilities for adapting and implementing new technology,

We will also will need to invite – not force – ministry staff and service partners to become a part of the system as they see the benefits to their work and as they are ready. (Contract Reform is a good model for this, where periodically another group of agencies is invited to join the project, based on their readiness to make the required changes.)

This will require more time, but it will also ensure less disruption to services, less anxiety for staff, and greater commitment to making the new system work.

Relationships

The relationship between government and its service partners has not always been either smooth or easy.

Lack of trust between service agencies and government remains an issue, and there is often not enough understanding of the pressures and constraints under which each side is working.

Service partners particularly may also feel threatened at the thought of not being in control of their own files and information, and that human resource data may be used by government to "micro-manage" contracts. Some partners – particularly the smalier ones – may also lack the expertise they need to feel comfortable and confident with new technology.

We will need to build a solid basis of trust among all members of the sector, based on:

- a common understanding of the importance of this enterprise
- a common vision of what we are trying to achieve – particularly in the area of providing client services while at the same time protecting client confidentiality
- a common definition of how we are going to work together to achieve the vision (all relationships clearly defined)
- a common belief that technology really will lead to better service, and
- equal power, knowledge and control.

Pathfinder Project: Community Web Portal

Individual government ministries and service agencies are at varying stages in developing a "web presence" – some have very advanced, interactive web sites, some have no web sites at all. Most websites act more as billboards of information rather than an entry or "portal" to services. A community web portal would be an exciting way to allow families to search for and register for programs and enter our network of services in a different way.

Diversity of Needs and Interests

Service partners working with the Ministry of Children and Families vary dramatically in size, location, in the services they provide, in their needs and in their interests – which means it will be difficult to come to a consensus in decision making, and to develop a single coordinated approach, particularly to client case management.

In addition, many service agencies currently work with more than one ministry and some with more than one government, and under a mix of over-lapping regulations and legislation (this is particularly an issue for multi-service agencies).

The goal of eventually being able to share data with a variety of other stakeholders – doctors, teachers and the courts, for example – also increases the complexity of ensuring the secure transfer of information.

Whatever shared system we come up with will need to be extremely flexible to meet the diverse – and constantly changing – needs and interests of all stakeholders.

Current Infrastructure

The ministry and most service partners already have a certain amount of technology infrastructure in place. They will not want to see that investment thrown away.

Staff are also used to the machines, platforms and software programs they are using now, and many may be reluctant to change.

We will need to find way to build on existing investments in technology wherever possible, and on existing preferences – or provide a solid rationale, with the benefits of new and different technology clearly laid out, backed up with sufficient training to make the move to new hardware and software as easy as possible.

Funding/Ownership

A shared information management system will not come cheap. Who will fund it – and who will own and manage it – are both crucial issues.

The system will need not only significant start-up funds but an ongoing commitment of resources that will enable us to keep up with rapid technological change: who will or should pay?

Active ownership – as well as concrete involvement in both long-term and day-to-day management – will also be essential for lasting success. All partners will need to feel they are a fundamental part of decision making, and that they have a definite say in making sure the system continues to meet their particular needs.

Also essential will be some kind of built-in mechanism or protocols for reaching consensus, balancing and resolving competing needs, and assigning accountability.

Currently, we see a number of possible ownership/management options. These range from:

- government and service partners jointly and equally owning and managing the shared information technology system, to bringing in a private sector information technology provider to join with us – government and service partners – in owning and managing the system, to
- government and service partners owning and managing separate but parallel and compatible information technology systems, to
- creating a third party – which could be either a Crown corporation, government agency, private company, or private agency – to own and manage the shared information technology system, while both ministry staff and service partners use it.

We Want to Know What You Think

Options for Feedback

Feedback to this draft discussion paper is due by **September 15, 2000.**

You have two options:

1. You can fill out the feedback form that follows as is, or use it as the basis for a written submission to provide us with your own individual response.

2. You can organize – or request your branch/organization to organize – a group consultation/discussion of this paper, and provide us with a group response.

If you decide to use the feedback form, the easiest and quickest way to fill it out and send it back to us is on-line. The form is posted (with instructions) on our dedicated website:

www.ptimbc.org

If you are sending in an individual or group submission, please mail, fax or e-mail to:

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Feedback Form

Shared Information Management Plan

Do you agree with the idea of a Shared Information Management Plan?

In what areas, in particular, do you think a shared information management system makes the most sense? (for example, in case or contract management, referrals)

Where do you see the most potential for information technology in your work?

Where will information technology help most in our work with children and families?

Vision

Do you agree with the vision we have outlined here? Why/why not?

What would you change? Why?

Feedback Form (cont'd)

Principles

Do you agree with the principles? Why/why not?

Which do you feel are the most important principles?

What would you change? Why?

Issues

Which, to you, are the most important issues listed in this paper? Why?

Do you have any ideas for how we might resolve these issues? What are your solutions?

Are there any issues we've missed?